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ABSTRACT

The Parent Information Network (PIN) is an initiative of the Arizona Department of Education to involve families of special education students. Led by parents of children with special needs, PIN provides information and technical assistance to families and educators throughout the state. The primary role is to facilitate the volunteer steering committee, Parents Are Liaisons to Schools (PALS), a 21-member volunteer group of parents of special needs children from diverse backgrounds and communities who are appointed for 3-year terms. PALS members offer: parental feedback on special education topics; update local parents and special education directors with information disseminated by the department of education, including legislation and funding issues; give assistance and support to other PALS members; and encourage parents to become aware of their rights and responsibilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The concerns and suggestions of parents have been used in state planning and development of new initiatives, including a conflict resolution system, grant funds for parent involvement activities at the local level, parent training workshops, and an information clearinghouse that includes videotape and print material. In partnership with the special education director, PALS members develop an action plan tailored to the unique needs of their local school districts. PIN specialists are parents hired as part-time private contractors by the Arizona Department of Education to provide information, technical assistance, and training workshops to PALS, other parents, and educators. (TD)

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PARENTS AS CHANGE AGENTS: OVERVIEW OF THE ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, PARENT INFORMATION NETWORK

In 1988 the Arizona Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services, (ADE/ESS) chose to enhance parent involvement in urban and rural communities throughout the state, noting that parents are able and important advocates for their children who receive special education services. The Department has continued for more than a decade to promote family involvement and foster parent leadership roles. Exemplary projects supported by ADE/ESS have been successful in nurturing parent involvement in ways that have lead many families to take a more active leadership role in their schools, communities, and statewide projects.

The Parent Information Network is a hallmark of the Arizona initiatives to involve families of special education students. Since 1991, the Arizona Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services, has contracted with several parents who have children with special needs to enhance parent involvement activities throughout the state. Known as Parent Information Network (PIN) Specialists, these parent leaders provide information and technical assistance to families and educators throughout the state. The rich cultural heritage and diverse geographical locations of rural school districts add to the unique opportunities and challenges for the PIN Specialists.

The primary role of the PIN Specialists is to facilitate the volunteer steering committee, Parents are Liaisons to Schools (PALS). This 21 member group was formed in 1988 to assist the Arizona Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services, with it's plans to enhance family involvement. PALS offer parental feedback on special education topics; update local parents and special education directors with information the ADE/ESS disseminates, including legislation and funding issues; give assistance and support to other PALS members; and encourage parents to become aware of their rights and responsibilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Over the years, many PALS members have gone on to leadership roles on state, local, and regional advisory councils, school board positions, and in legislative advocacy.

PALS representatives are nominated by school district special education administrators to serve a three year term. Fathers, mothers and grandparents, some with previous leadership experience, and some without, are chosen from diverse backgrounds and communities to offer their time and parental experiences to make a difference for special education students. The volunteer group represents families who have children from a variety of special education classifications and ages. At any given time, the group has members who have just joined PALS, as well as members whose ongoing participation helps maintain the momentum. The longevity and impact of this program is a testament to it's energy and commitment to special education students.

Each school year PALS representatives agree to attend two all day meetings in Phoenix, and two regional meetings closer to their homes. Travel, lodging and meal expenses are reimbursed for the volunteer parents. At the beginning of each meeting PALS members introduce themselves and share demographic information about their district. Attention is paid to creating a comfortable environment for becoming acquainted with each other. In addition, each participant has an opportunity to share information about parent involvement activities in their district, and network with the group to exchange ideas for addressing the needs of families and students in their communities. New PALS are carefully oriented to their role so that they know what to expect at the meetings and how they can participate. Parents who have been PALS for a year, or more, are asked to co-facilitate the meetings with one of the PIN Specialists.

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Guest speakers are invited based on requests from parents. Presentations have focused on assistive technology, behavior management, augmentative communication, academic achievement testing, special education related Inernet resources, student led IEPs, and many others. A highlight of a recent meeting was a panel of adolescent students who shared educational experiences they have had at school and how their parents' involvement has helped.

At the statewide meetings Department staff present current information on legislative topics and statewide initiatives. Parents are given the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback. PALS representatives are asked to take the information back to administrators and families in their school districts. Some PALS members have passed the updates along at local parent meetings and in school district newsletters.

Arizona Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services, staff carefully listen to the issues families bring to the meetings. The concerns and suggestions that parents have are very often used in state planning and development of new initiatives. ADE/ESS has revised publications to be more parent friendly, enhanced personnel training to include an emphasis on parent partnerships, hosted public forums, improved communication, developed an effective conflict resolution system, and earmarked funds for expanding parent involvement activities at the local level. Many rural schools applied for, and were granted these funds. The outcomes from the rural initiatives have given the state access to new ways to help involve parents and professionals in improved partnerships for team decision making

The Parent Information Network has also responded to the needs of families by creating new training workshops. PALS asked for instruction on parents' rights, IEPs, self-advocacy, and communication skills. These trainings are now regularly held by PIN Specialists around the state. In addition, documents have been authored by the PINS on topics families and educators have requested more information about. The Parent Information Network Clearinghouse distributes thousands of free resources annually. Many PALS members have set up mini-clearinghouses in their local communities to help educate families.

It's not uncommon for some families to be very involved in their child's education, however, they aren't able to attend activities on the school campus. PALS have formed video lending libraries tailored to meet the needs of those families. Video resources, on a variety of topics from parents' rights to disability awareness, give families a chance to educate themselves in the convenience of their home. The knowledge and skills they gain from the videos help them become even more involved in their child's education. The support parents give to their child's education at home is as equally important as the support they show at school functions.

Network News, the PIN quarterly newsletter, highlights PALS activities. PIN Specialists author this free publication that is mailed to over 4,000 parents and educators. National and state legislative updates, innovative special education programs, new resources, a question and answer column, and a training calendar are regular features. Immediately after current editions are mailed out, PIN Specialists get requests for new resources and follow-up information on the feature articles.

Another Department publication, SPecial EDition, targets special educators. PIN and PALS activities are regularly highlighted. On occasion, articles written by the PIN Specialists, PALS, or other parents are featured to give teachers and administrators the family's perspective of parenting a child with special needs. Parent participation is respected and encouraged by ADE/ESS. Their commitment to parent/professional partnerships is recognized by thousands of readers from around the state.

The behind-the-scenes support of each PALS special education director is the key at the local level for the success of this project. Their pledge to enhance parent involvement at the district level is essential. In partnership with the special education director, and assistance from their assigned PIN Specialist, PALS members develop an action plan individualized to their local school district. Administrators and PALS have started with very little parental involvement and built a program that reaches to all special education families in their district. By

focusing on local needs, many rural districts have been able to tailor improvements and resolutions that earnestly respond to the unique needs of the rural community versus a "one-size fits all" solution statewide.

Initial steps to assess the needs of families in the community is often the first step. Surveys yield ideas and topics that are incorporated into an action plan. Some PALS have worked with a small group to create parent information packets. These packets are given to families at IEP meetings in response to their request for special education and disability specific information. PALS have set up special education resource centers in school libraries and on school web sites. It's not always easy to get parents to attend meetings, but when the events are tailored to their needs the turn out improves. PALS have hosted training workshops, public forums, sibling workshops, guardianship seminars, transition fairs, social events, disability awareness presentations, disability specific support groups, and teacher recognition assemblies. When appropriate, meetings have included child care, meals or refreshments, and translators. Events have been held in the early morning, mid-day, in the evening or on the weekend. It's not uncommon for PALS to collaborate with other parent support groups in their community to offer these events.

Nurturing better communication between home and school, plus linking parents with family support organizations, has been found effective in strengthening families. Not all family support organizations are located within the surrounding community. Outreach support services are often accessed by families via toll-free telephone numbers or on-line connections. This is particularly true in the extremely remote regions of Arizona, including Native American reservations.

The PIN Specialists are available to consult with the PALS representatives at any stage of the planning process. PINS keep in touch via either mail, phone, e-mail or on-site visits at least once a month. If needed, PINS attend events with the PALS to nurture their leadership skills. PALS even help other PALS. Mentoring is an important aspect of the PINS and PALS partnership. Participation in this project develops and sharpens leadership skills. In fact, the majority of the PIN Specialists were once PALS. By sharing successes, as well as how they have overcome local barriers, the PINS and PALS initiatives have been a springboard for other achievements and systemic refinements. The leadership efforts of all parents make them valued change agents in Arizona.

Parent Information Network Specialists are recruited by the Arizona Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services as private contractors. Interested parents respond to an RFP for one of six regions in the state. Respondents must meet certain specifications and offer strategies for addressing the goals and objectives of the project. This very unique project gives parents an avenue to work part time from their home base. PIN Specialists are in constant contact with the ADE/ESS staff coordinator and other PINS. Each PIN Specialist has phone, fax, pager and e-mail capabilities. Monthly conference call agendas focus on current activities, future planning, and always include opportunities to share success stories, to ponder dilemmas and continually hone leadership skills.

Each PIN Specialist has individual skills and experiences that strengthen the project. Some live in remote rural communities, some in large metropolitan cities, some in small towns, several in Native American reservation areas, and some near Mexican border towns. Each PINS has a child with a different disability. There is also diversity amongst the PINS in level of education, ethnicity and age. Currently, all the PINS are female.

The differences are distinct, and the similarities are obvious. Each PIN Specialist is zealous about parent involvement in special education. All the PIN activities are considered as possibilities for all communities in Arizona. The success of this project lies in the ability of the regional PINS to adapt the resources, trainings, and support to fit the needs of the community they are working in and the individuals who request assistance.

The Parent Information Network strives to work as a unit to reach goals. Certain tasks are rotated. The team also recognizes that some jobs are better done by a PIN with a certain talent and interest. Most assignments

will give the PINS an opportunity to further develop their skills, as accountability to the group and state is expected. PINS take their role as a parent leader seriously.

PIN Specialists are familiar with the local education agencies, charter schools, state agencies, and non-profit organizations in their assigned region. ADE/ESS provides them with listings of schools, administrators, addresses, and phone/fax numbers. PINS routinely notify these groups of upcoming trainings, and available resources, in addition to mailing them Network News. PINS are also invited to attend state sponsored conferences and workshops to meet and network with these groups.

In addition to activities already mentioned, PIN Specialists frequently attend meetings and conferences with agencies and organizations to address special education and family issues. PINS are respected by professionals and families alike for the role they have of promoting positive family/school partnerships and quality special education programs for students of all ages. PINS have been well trained in special education law, conflict resolution, communication skills, meeting planning and facilitation, and certain disability specific topics. Their personal experiences raising a child with special needs gives them additional skills in mentoring and family support, as well as how to work proactively with educators and service providers. The expertise and role of the PINS has served as a conduit for parents, educators, and service providers to improve the referral network for families of children with special needs.

The breadth of their experience and the purpose of the PIN project has lead to many invitations to present training workshops, university and college lectures, and conference presentations at the local, regional, state and national level. PINS are regularly asked to consult with educators and service professionals about strategies to improve parent participation and leadership. Many of the PINS articles have been published in professional newsletters and journals.

The Parent Information Network Specialists diligently research topics of interest to families and educators in an effort to find, or author, documents for the PIN Clearinghouse. Well over 100 articles, brochures, booklets, audio and video cassettes and resource catalogs are listed on their order form, many in English and Spanish. Singles copies of the resources are sent free of charge. And, all materials can be photocopied. Copies of the order form are disseminated to PALS, libraries, schools, and at all trainings and presentations the PINS make. Certain video and audio tapes can be dubbed and have proved useful for parents and educators to share with others in their area.

In recent years, the Arizona Department of Education web page has included a link to the Parent Information Network's home page (http://www.ade.state.az.us/programs/assistance/ess/pinspals/). Viewers can download selected resources, directly link with PIN Specialists, and get updated information about trainings and current special education topics. This is just another strategy the PIN utilizes to encourage parent information, enhance knowledge of special education and promote parent networking and leadership.

When PIN Specialists have the opportunity to touch families, either face-to-face, by phone, or through resource dissemination, their primary goal is to give them the support and information they need at that moment. An 800 phone number connects families with an ADE/ESS receptionist who then forwards a message along to the appropriate PIN Specialist who promptly contacts the family. However, most often parents will call PINS directly. What makes the PINS role so effective is that, as parents, they can empathize with families. PINS encourage families to remain active in their child's education and feel confident in the partnership role they have with the school.

Often, parents remain in contact with PINS. When this occurs PINS are occasionally able to help the parent and their respective school district initiate parent involvement related activities. Similar to the support they offer PALS, the PIN Specialists have mentored parents in many communities to build partnerships with the school

and establish a leadership role. By doing so, these parents have become invaluable local parent contacts, which has been especially beneficial to rural and remote communities.

Conflicts do occur between families and school. Both parents and special educators use the Parent Information Network for assistance. When that happens PINS share ideas for the most non-adversarial resolution possible, though never losing sight of the procedural safeguards IDEA guarantees students and families. PINS have state assigned regional consultants available to assist them with situations that are beyond their expertise and function.

As stated early in this paper, the Parent Information Network is a hallmark of the Arizona Department of Education's initiatives to involve families of special education students. But, it isn't the only project with statewide impact and promising results. Enhancing Arizona's Parent Network, and Improved Parent and School Decision Making Grants, are two recent initiatives to further meet the goal of family participation.

Enhancing Arizona's Parent Information Network is designed to bring together all of the parent groups who work with children who have special needs to strengthen efforts in the area of information, training, leadership development and empowerment of parents. Initial meetings have brought together some of the players to share their mission statements, recognize the similarities and differences in their activities, and share ideas and resources for attaining the ideals of this new coalition. It is likely that as the group continues to define their group objectives, they will coalesce their training dates into a central training calendar, note gaps in needed supports for families, and determine possible ways to reach their collective goals. This coalition will include the PIN, state social services agencies, non-profit parent groups, and Arizona's federally funded parent training institute and protection and advocacy agency.

In the second initiative, over a dozen schools have been granted funds from ADE/ESS to build capacity to increase cooperative problem solving between parents and school personnel with the use of alternative dispute resolutions. Schools from rural and urban districts are developing strategies to address issues unique to their communities. Efforts thus far have included school district surveys to families and educators as a method of assessing needs and satisfaction. Staff and parent inservices on conflict resolution and team-building have been held. Communication with families has been improved with the publication of family oriented newsletters and newly activated phone trees. Web sites are being used to disseminate special education information. Parents have been hired by districts to serve as home/school liaisons. Additional schools will be eligible for funding in the near future. In both of the above initiatives, the Parent Information Network Specialists are actively involved and/or available for technical assistance.

As the nation focuses on improving educational outcomes for all students, ADE/ESS is in the forefront for developing programs that value family involvement and promote parental leadership. These innovative and successful programs have positively effected family/school partnerships and subsequently influence student performance. The Department's philosophy that parents should be equal partners in the education of their children is evident in their actions. As partners in the education process, families are vital change agents to ensuring a system that prepares their children for the future.